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ABSTRACT

The influence of marital status on the well-being of older persons has been of interest to social gerontologists. To investigate the well-being of married, widowed, and divorced older persons, 397 older men and women completed eight measures of well-being, including daily living activities, overall financial status, and psychological health. Results indicated that marital status was strongly associated with well-being on six indicators, i.e., housing quality, medical, financial, social, and psychological statuses, and cognitive functioning. The well-being of divorced persons was significantly lower than that of married or widowed persons, suggesting that the stigma often placed upon the divorced may have an impact on older persons. (Author/KMF)

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WELL-BEING: DIFFERENCES AMONG MARRIED, WIDOWED AND DIVORCED OLDER PERSONS

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WELL-BEING: DIFFERENCES AMONG MARRIED, WIDOWED AND DIVORCED OLDER PERSONS[1]

The importance of marital status to the well-being of older persons has been of interest to social gerontologists for some time. This interest has generally been focused in one of two directions. The first of these directions is widowhood. Lopata's (1973) study has generated considerable interest in widowhood work (c.f., Harvey & Bahr, 1974; Atchley, 1975). Indeed, widowhood has been seen as one of the central transitions confronting older women.

A second direction has been to focus on "alone" elderly without attention to marital status (see Gubrium, 1976, for a concise review of this literature). This work has suggested the importance of aloneness as a variable affecting the well-being of older persons. "Aloneness," however, has included the widowed, the never-married, the divorced and the separated. Moreover, given the proportionately greater numbers of widowed persons who are not living with someone, aloneness has often been equated with widowhood.

To date, relatively little research has been carried out in an attempt to isolate the significance of the divorced status on well-being in late life. The limited amount of research which has been done suggests that divorced persons may be worse off than are widowed or married persons in a number of areas affecting well-being. Kitson et al. (1980) found that divorced women felt much more restricted in their relations with others than

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[1]This work has been supported in part by a research grant, #90-267-9126, from NRTA-AARP Andrus Foundation. The authors would like to thank Dr. Barbara Stewart for assistance she provided in setting up the analyses.

did widowed individuals. Those results remained when controls for education and religious backgrounds were introduced. Deckert and Langelier (1978), studying late divorces (after 20 years of marriage) in Canada, found that divorced individuals rated divorce as the most stressful life event, ranking even above the death of a spouse (p. 384). Data presented by Hutchinson (1975) in a study of low-income elderly, indicated the widowed rated themselves higher in three of five measures of well-being than did the divorced respondents.[2] Specifically, these data indicated that divorced individuals had significantly poorer satisfaction with life and were generally less happy than widowed individuals.

However, these data do not provide much information about the overall well-being of divorced older persons. Further, they do not allow us to draw any conclusions regarding the comparative well-being of older persons who are in the married, widowed, or divorced statuses. Given the considerable evidence that the number of divorced older persons will increase significantly over the next decade (Glick & Norton, 1977, Schoen & Nelson, 1974; Glick & Norton, 1973) these are issues which need attention.

This paper addresses these issues. More specifically, the research reported on here attempts to answer three questions: (1) are there differences in the characteristics of the married, widowed, and divorced groups; (2) are there significant differences in well-being among the three marital statuses; and (3) if differences in the married, widowed, and divorced elderly do exist, are they influenced by marital status? Based on the fragmentary evidence from other research, it was hypothesized that the well-being of

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[2]Hutchinson, however, concluded from these data that the widowed rated themselves lower on life-satisfaction than did other respondents.

divorced persons is significantly lower than that of the married or widowed persons.

The Sample and the Subsamples

An interview sample of 397 elderly persons residing in a predominatly urban county in Oregon was used for this study.[3] The study sample was purposively selected to represent a marginally subsisting elderly population found in middle-sized communities in the United States. Sample selection criteria included age (65+), income (not more than $250 per month per individual), and living arrangement (non-institutionalized). The resulting sample, as shown in Table I, may be defined as representing a "high risk" elderly population. The sample includes a proportionately large number of older persons over 75 years of age, who live alone and who have an income of less than $3000 per year.

The sample was further broken down into three subsamples: married, widowed, and divorced/separated. Those never married were excluded from the sample because of the small size of that group (N=15). Table I also presents a demographic profile of the selected subsamples.

Study Variables and Methodology

In addition to the demographic characteristic (age, sex, household income, occupational status, ethnicity, educational level, and household composition) eight measures of well-being were used in the analysis

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[3]The sample was originally drawn for a research project funded by the Social Security Administration (SSA-PMB-74-275) to study the effects of Supplemental Security Income. The sample is further reported upon in A Longitudinal Study of a High Risk Urban Elderly Population, John O'Brien and Renee Alexander (Eds.), a final report prepared for the Social Security Administration by the Institute on Aging, School of Urban Affairs, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon 97207, December 1978.

TABLE I. SELECTED DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE PATTERNS

	Married		Widowed		Divorced/ Separated		Total Sample	
AGE (years of age)	(N=75)		(N=252)		(N=53)		(N=380)	
	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)
65-69	33.3	25	12.7	32	30.2	16	19.2	73
70-74	28.0	21	21.8	55	30.2	16	24.2	92
75-79	13.3	10	24.6	62	17.0	9	21.3	81
80-84	14.7	11	23.8	60	15.1	8	20.8	79
85+	10.7	8	17.1	43	7.5	4	14.5	55
			($x^2(8)=29.44$, $p<.01$)					
HOUSEHOLD INCOME	(N=75)		(N=252)		(N=53)		(N=380)	
	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)
1-3000	18.7	14	71.0	179	81.1	43	61.8	235
3001-3690	14.6	11	11.9	30	11.3	6	11.8	45
3691+	66.7	50	17.1	43	7.5	4	26.3	26
			($x^2(4)=92.12$, $p<.01$)					
SEX	(N=75)		(N=252)		(N=53)		(N=380)	
	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)
male	44.0	33	15.1	38	26.4	14	22.4	85
female	56.0	42	84.9	214	73.6	39	77.6	295
			($x^2(2)=28.42$, $p<.01$)					
ETHNICITY	(N=74)		(N=252)		(N=53)		(N=379)	
	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)
white	95.9	71	96.3	242	96.2	51	96.0	364
non-white	4.1	3	3.7	10	3.8	2	4.0	16
			($x^2(2)=.007$, n.s.)					
EDUCATION	(N=75)		(N=252)		(N=53)		(N=380)	
	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)
0-8 years	44.0	33	48.8	123	45.3	24	47.4	180
9-12 years	44.0	33	36.5	92	43.4	23	38.9	148
13+ years	12.0	9	14.7	37	11.3	6	13.7	52
			($x(6)=2.53$, n.s.)					
HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION	(N=75)		(N=252)		(N=51)		(N=378)	
	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)
alone	9.3	7	89.7	226	90.2	46	73.8	279
not alone	90.7	68	10.3	26	9.9	5	26.2	99
			($x^2(2)=201.22$, $p<.01$)					
SES	(N=68)		(N=228)		(N=52)		(N=348)	
	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)
Skilled Professional/ Technical Workers	50.0	34	51.3	117	46.2	24	50.6	176
Laborers, private, household, other operatives	50.0	34	48.7	111	53.8	28	49.4	172
			($x^2(2)=0.54$, n.s.)					

(activities of daily living, cognitive functioning, quality of housing, level of impairment, overall financial status, medical status, psychological status, and social status). These eight measures were constructed to reflect different aspects of well-being and are composite indices developed from a number of questionnaire items. Initial testing has supported the validity and reliability of the measures.[4]

Initial data analysis procedures involved a simple examination of frequency distributions to determine if gross differences among the three subsamples existed. On the basis of observed differences in the distribution of characteristics by marital status, cross-tabulations were completed and chi-squares computed for the demographic variables. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was carried out to determine if there were differences among the three marital status categories on the eight well-being indicators. Accompanying the overall ANOVA for each indicator were two orthogonal planned comparisons. For the first planned comparison examining the differences between the married and widowed groups, no differences were expected. For the second comparison, contrasting the married and widowed groups with the divorced, it was predicted that the divorced group would exhibit lower levels of well-being than the other two groups.

Findings

The demographic characteristics of the married, widowed, and divorced/separated subsamples do differ in some ways as indicated by the chi-square

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[4]Item correlation and factor analysis procedures were used to test the validity of index items. The results of these analyses, as well as more information about the index items are found in "Testing a Model of Late Life Decline: Predicting Four Late Life Outcomes from Nine Measures of Well-Being," by Nancy A. Whitelaw and Barbara J. Stewart in A Longitudinal Study of a High Risk Urban Elderly Population (Op. Cit.)

tests in Table I. There are no significant differences among the three marital groups with respect to ethnicity, educational level, or occupational status. The sample is White (96%), has less than a high school education ($\bar{X}$=9.6 years), and is equally divided between white and blue collar socio-economic statuses.

There are differences in age, household income, sex, and household composition among the three marital groups. Married and divorced persons are significantly younger ($\bar{X}$ = 3.5 years) than widowed persons. However, widowed and divorced persons are much more likely to be female, to live alone, and to have a lower annual household income than married persons. Thus, with the exception of age, widowed and divorced persons are comparable in their demographic characteristics.

The similarities in the demographic characteristics of the widowed and the divorced groups are expected ones. Life expectancy differentials for men and women result in a population of older people (65+) in the United States which is 58% female. This imbalance in the male/female ratio grows more pronounced in populations over age 75. Consequently, while most older men remarry after divorce or widowhood, there are fewer available marriage partners for older widowed or divorced women. Further, older persons not living with a spouse are likely to be living alone. Lower annual household income is also expected for widowed and divorced older women, given current payment formulas for old age benefits and historic patterns of laborforce participation.

Well-being among the three marital status groups also differed. Using ANOVA to compare the married, widowed, and divorced on each of the well-being indicators revealed significant differences on four of the eight dependent

variables. Significant differences were found for quality of housing ($p<.01$), overall financial status ($p<.01$), psychological status ($p<.01$), and social status ($p<.05$). A summary of the ANOVA results are presented in Table II.

Group differences are more clearly reflected in the planned comparisons which accompanied the ANOVA's. For the first set of planned comparisons, examining married-widowed differences, the married group expressed higher well-being on activities of daily living than did the widowed group ($p<.01$). There were no significant differences between the married and the widowed group on any of the other seven well-being indicators. Thus, on seven of eight indicators, the married and widowed groups had similar levels of well-being.

For the second planned comparison, contrasting the married and widowed groups with the divorced, the divorced group exhibited significantly lower well-being on six of the eight measures. The divorced had lower well-being on cognitive functioning ($p<.01$), quality of housing ($p<.01$), overall financial status ($p<.01$), medical status ($p<.01$), psychological status ($p<.01$), and social status ($p<.01$). The only measures for which the divorced did not differ significantly from the married and the widowed were activities of daily living and level of impairment. These data are summarized in Table II.

A final step in the analysis involved determining whether observed demographic differences were related to differences in well-being scores of the three marital status groups. T-tests carried out on sex (male-female), age (below-above 75), income (below-above $3000 per year) and household composition (alone-not alone) did not, for the most part, indicate a significant relationship with well-being. Only seven of 96 t-tests yielded

TABLE II: MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR THE THREE MARITAL GROUPS ON EIGHT WELL-BEING INDICATORS; ANOVA AND PLANNED COMPARISON RESULTS*

Well-Being Indicators	Married (N=75)	Widowed (N=252)	Divorced (N=53)	Overall F (df=2, 377)	Planned Comparison of Married with Widowed (t, df=325)	Planned Comparison of Married and Widowed with Divorced (t, df=378)
Activities of Daily Living	M=2.62 SD=0.67	M=2.43 SD=0.65	M=2.50 SD=0.60	F=2.50 n.s.	t=2.226 p<.01	t=0.279 n.s.
Cognitive Functioning	M=2.83 SD=0.41	M=2.84 SD=0.49	M=2.70 SD=0.48	F=2.13 n.s.	t=-.1440 n.s.	t=1.970 p<.05
Quality of Housing	M=3.15 SD=0.51	M=3.03 SD=0.55	M=2.75 SD=0.60	F=8.63 p<.01	t=1.578 n.s.	t=4.110 p<.01
Level of Impairment	M=2.89 SD=0.43	M=2.82 SD=0.46	M=2.77 SD=0.52	F=1.13 n.s.	t=1.179 n.s.	t=1.185 n.s.
Medical Status	M=2.78 SD=0.46	M=2.74 SD=0.42	M=2.55 SD=0.49	F=2.70 n.s.	t=0.533 n.s.	t=2.327 p<.01
Overall Financial Status	M=2.92 SD=0.62	M=2.90 SD=0.59	M=2.63 SD=0.56	F=9.50 p<.01	t=0.263 n.s.	t=4.290 p<.01
Psychological Status	M=2.84 SD=0.70	M=2.71 SD=0.68	M=2.43 SD=0.67	F=5.58 p<.01	t=1.086 n.s.	t=3.083 p<.01
Social Status	M=2.63 SD=0.57	M=2.62 SD=0.53	M=2.43 SD=0.51	F=3.14 p<.05	t=1.199 n.s.	t=2.459 p<.01

*Well-being indicators are on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1.00 being the lowest score and 4.00 being the highest score.

significant differences. These results are within the expected realm for chance occurance. Thus, demographic differences do not appear to account for much variance in well-being scores of the three marital groups.

Summary/Conclusions

In the research reported on here we sought to answer three questions:

(1) are there differences in the characteristics of a sample of married, widowed, and divorced/separated persons;

(2) are there significant differences in the well-being of the three marital groups;

(3) if differences in well-being exist, are they influenced by marital status?

Additionally, we sought to confirm or reject the hypothesis that divorced persons would score significantly lower on measures of well-being than either married or widowed persons.

Based on the findings presented above, we can conclude that the answer to the first two questions is yes. Further, we can confirm our hypothesis for six of the eight indicators of well-being. Our analysis indicates that the widowed and divorced/separated samples are not significantly different in their demographic characteristics, with the exception of age. The married group, however, is significantly different from the widowed and divorced groups in three areas. They are much more likely to be male, to have household incomes of more than $3000 per year, and not to be living alone.

Although the widowed and the divorced groups are comparable in their demographic characteristics, they do not have comparable well-being scores. Rather, it is the married and the widowed groups which do not differ in their well-being. The planned comparisons yielded results which partially confirms our hypothesis that the divorced group would score significantly

lower on measures of well-being. Data analyses consistently confirm lower well-being scores for quality of housing, overall financial status, psychological status, and social status. These findings support those of Kitson et al. (1980) and Deckert and Langelier (1978).

Determining whether the differences found in well-being are influenced by marital status is considerably more difficult. Our analysis would seem to suggest that the differences found are not a function of differences in demographic characteristics. Indeed, as noted above, while the widowed group is similar to the divorced in their demographic characteristics, they are comparable to the married in terms of well-being scores.

One possible explanation of lower well-being scores among the divorced group may be that there is a self-selection process operating. That is, those people who become divorced may manifest lower feelings of well-being initially. In other words, divorce may at least partially be the result rather than the cause of well-being.

Another possible explanation is that divorce may lead to difficult adjustment problems. Kinship ties, for example, may be disrupted in several ways by divorce. Divorced individuals may have difficulty maintaining ties with children and grandchildren. Relationships with former in-laws are almost certainly to become problematic. One or the other ex-spouse may be "blamed" for the divorce by members of the family network. The Kitson et al. (1980) finding that divorced individuals feel more restricted in relationships may be related to these adjustment problems.

Still another possible explanation may come from the stigma often placed upon divorced individuals, especially women (Brown et al., 1976; Brandwein, Brown & Fox, 1974; Weiss, 1973) which results in lowered

well-being. Feelings of failure in the relationship may result in lowered feelings of interpersonal competence and personal efficacy (Schulz & Hanusa, 1979; Schulz, 1976). Those whose lives evolved around being someone's spouse may be left without meaningful roles. Such responses to divorce might well result in lower well-being.

Finally, it is possible that older persons may not be able to recover, even over time, from the economic consequences of divorce. Upon divorce, the economic assets of the couple are likely to be split in some fashion. The divorced person is less likely to be able to "catch up" with the accumulation of assets of a married person or retained by those widowed upon a spouse's death. This would appear to be reflected in the comparable annual household income of divorced and widowed persons and in a significantly lower score on the well-being indicator measuring overall financial status. Overall, financial status considers assets other than dollar incomes such as property, stocks, bonds, and savings.

In conclusion, our analyses suggest that marital status is strongly associated with well-being in at least six areas--quality of housing, medical, financial, social, and psychological statuses, and cognitive functioning. For now, however, this association and the potential explanations identified above remain largely conjecture. More research is certainly needed. It would indeed be helpful if we had a more complete understanding of the impact of divorce on older people before their increasing numbers demand a public response.

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